

A PRIDE AND PREJUDICE VARIATION

a more
Gentlemanlike
Manner

HARRIET
KNOWLES

Hunsford. The end of Darcy's hopes and dreams.

He decides to give her the letter and escape the humiliation.

But he cannot do it. No matter the cost, he will do anything — anything — to be worthy of her acceptance.

Elizabeth Bennet must decide which of the two characters is the real Mr. Darcy, before she can choose which path in life will make her happiest.

Should she follow her heart, or her head?

A More Gentlemanlike Manner is a quick short novelette of 11,500 words, ideal for when you have an inclination for a Darcy and Elizabeth sweet fix romance, but only a little time.

A More Gentlemanlike Manner

Harriet Knowles

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This book is set in Regency England. It is written by an English author, using British English words and spelling.

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Mr. Darcy bowed haughtily. “Would you do me the honour of reading that letter?”

Elizabeth had taken the letter automatically when he thrust it towards her, and before she could say a word, he turned his back and was soon lost from sight.

She turned back into the grove, turning the letter over and over in her hand. He could not have sent it to her, of course — it was rather improper of him to even give it into her hands.

She walked further into the trees and found a stump to lean against. She looked at the direction.

Her name in his handwriting. Her heart tightened. *A very elegant hand*, her mother would say, and Elizabeth huffed a rueful laugh and reminded herself of her steadfast dislike of him.

The letter sat loosely between her fingers as she stared into the distance. Did she really want to read it? It might remind her of yesterday’s anger. It might repeat his offensive comments about her inferior background and insult the family she loved.

But there had been a deep hurt in his eyes as he handed her the letter, and lines of weariness etched into his features. It was several pages long, and must have taken him some time to write.

She frowned. She owed him no duty to read it — even if he had laboured over the writing. He was nothing to her. But ...

Something deep within her knew she was the cause of the hurt he’d suffered. If she was honest with herself, she must acknowledge that he meant something to her, even if she had declared otherwise.

She would not be like him and refuse to listen to his side of the story. The heat of a blush rose on her face as she remembered she’d been very hurtful in the accusations she’d hurled at him. On thinking about

it, she felt a little ashamed.

Something prickled the nape of her neck, and she looked up and around the grove. Was she alone? A twig snapped underfoot, and Mr. Darcy came into view.

Elizabeth rose to her feet as he bowed.

“I apologise for intruding again, madam, but I see you may be undecided whether to read the letter.”

She looked at him consideringly. His voice was soft and gentle, most unlike the tones she’d heard from him before.

“It seems improper.” She turned it over in her hands. “And I am wondering if I ought to distress myself by reading it. After all, why ought I to be concerned? I will never see you again.”

A slight smile quirked at the corner of his mouth. “I would by no means suspend any pleasure of yours.”

She found herself smiling at the repetition of his words from the Netherfield ball.

His eyes were on the letter. “I was not the master of my own feelings yesterday, Miss Bennet. I would hope I have been able to express my thoughts rather better in writing, and beg your indulgence of my hope that you read it.” He bowed again and walked slowly away, down the slight slope of the meadow.

She watched him go, her finger moving along the fold of the letter between her fingers.

He settled himself on a log, facing away from her, and gazed into the distance.

Elizabeth stared at his back for a minute. Did he mean to sit there, making her uncomfortable, while she read his letter? Her anger rose again, unbidden, but the memory of the concern and sincerity in his gaze made her sigh.

She broke the seal and unfolded the letter. Closely written, not a blot or crossing-out. The writing of a man who thought through his communication before committing a word to paper.

She would read it in the same spirit.

IT TOOK A LONG TIME. Every few sentences, she would find her ire rising — then the word “*but ...*” would enter her mind.

She looked out at the view, trying to ignore the sight of Mr. Darcy further down the meadow.

Charlotte’s words came back to her mind.

In nine cases out of ten a woman had better show more affection than she feels. Bingley likes your sister undoubtedly; but he may never do more than like her, if she does not help him on.

If Charlotte had been right, and Mr. Bingley hadn’t discerned Jane’s feelings for him, then why was she chastising Mr. Darcy for not seeing it, either?

And she was mortified about his description of Wickham. How could she, Elizabeth, have been so taken in by him? She prided herself on her good determination of character.

Every word she read seemed to cut with the precision of a knife, carving away at the falsehoods of the story she’d believed uncritically.

A movement down the meadow caught her attention. Mr. Darcy was climbing back towards her.

She smiled wryly. A letter received by post could be read and reread. There would be time to prepare her answer, to take some hours or days to commit one’s thoughts to paper and write back.

But they both knew she could never write to him. It would be a scandal, and might precipitate the very marriage she had so scorned yesterday.

She looked down at the letter in her hand. Was she still of the same opinion? She didn’t know.

HIS SHADOW CROSSED the edge of her vision, and she looked up. He was standing a few yards away, as if cautious of approaching too closely.

“I thank you for the honour of taking the time to read it, Miss Bennet. Might I hope you think a little better of me for doing so?”

She met his gaze. She still didn’t like his character, she told herself, and wondered inconsequentially why the passion in his eyes could discompose her breathing so much.

But she recalled the words he had written.

If you have not been mistaken here, I must have been in error. Your superior knowledge of your sister must make the latter probable ... I shall not scruple to assert that the serenity of your sister's countenance and air was such as might have given the most acute observer a conviction that, however amiable her temper, her heart was not likely to be easily touched.

“Why did you feel it impossible for my sister to have fallen irrevocably in love in just a few weeks?”

He turned and stared into space. “Considering your words last evening, I confess I must have been mistaken.”

She sighed and folded the pages, finding she did not want to disagree with him. “However, if Mr. Bingley is so inconstant a man, perhaps it was for the best that he left Netherfield.”

Mr. Darcy started. “I would not have you believe him anything other than a loyal friend and gentleman.”

Elizabeth glanced at his face and then away. “I suppose the discussion is without merit, seeing what has already happened.”

He drew a deep breath, and she wondered at his discomposure.

“If I have one desire from the letter, Miss Bennet, it is that you would be on your guard with Wickham. I would not wish you to find yourself in any difficulty.” He bowed, and she watched him walk away.

Walking away from her was the hardest thing he had ever done in his life, even more than bursting into the parsonage last night to declare for her.

But he had to walk away. She must come to a conclusion without him.

Darcy smiled thinly, he had to be encouraged by the look of doubt in those fine eyes when she'd glanced at him. It seemed he had given her cause to understand why he had acted as he did — at least as regarded both Wickham and her sister.

But as he walked deeper into the woods, his thoughts took a darker turn. He had not addressed her stinging words about his pride and disdain towards others. *Had you behaved in a more gentlemanlike manner ...* he shuddered.

She was right. He examined his actions; his words; his thoughts of those he felt beneath him. *She is tolerable, I suppose ...* he felt the heat of a flush under his collar. How could he ever have thought she might have favoured him, been teasing him with a hope of catching his attention?

Part of him wanted to flee the country, return to town and never see the source of his embarrassment again.

Never see her again. Cold seeped through him. He could not do it. No matter the humiliation, he could not stay away from her.

He stopped, thinking. How could he possibly win her? Could he become the gentleman she deserved?

He strode on. Of course he could. Darcys could do anything they chose to. He desired her absolutely. No other would do, he knew that deep within him. His heart was lost to her, and he could no more leave here than fly.

He frowned, how to begin? A few strides later, he knew and turned

back towards the house. He had another letter to write. He huffed a laugh, Bingley would be surprised.

AN HOUR LATER, he sealed Bingley's letter, and the note he'd penned to Georgiana; and rang for his servant.

"Mr. Maunder, please see that these letters are sent express as soon as possible." He hesitated, perhaps he could begin his quest to be a better man. "I have also decided to stay in Kent a little longer. I'm sorry you have the extra work of unpacking again."

His valet looked startled. "Think nothing of it, Mr. Darcy."

As the door closed behind the man, Darcy chuckled to himself, and crossed to the window, staring out. He wondered how soon his family would notice a change in him, and what would be said.

A perfunctory knock on the door preceded his cousin only by an instant.

"What's the matter, Darcy? The groom said you did not ride out this morning, and now my batman has begun unpacking my trunks. Are we not returning to town?"

"I wish to stay here a few days longer, Richard. I hope it does not discompose you too much."

He *must* be gentlemanlike. "Or you could go, and send my coach back if you prefer."

Richard guffawed. "I would only leave you if you intend to become betrothed today."

Darcy tried to hide his flush. How had his cousin guessed?

"You do!" Richard looked narrowly at him. "What does Anne think about it?"

"Anne?"

"If you're going to become engaged to her, you must have spoken to her!" Richard sounded bemused.

"I'm not going to marry Anne!" Darcy grimaced. "Whatever made you think that?"

Richard crossed to the decanter and poured two drinks. "You say you wish to stay here. Yet you have always said you need me here to

protect you from Lady Catherine's plot to ensnare you for Anne." He handed one of the glasses to Darcy and dropped into the leather chair by the fire. "And now you say I might return to town if I wish, but you're staying. Of course I assumed you were going to offer for Anne."

"Oh." Darcy gingerly took the chair opposite. It would be difficult if his new manners were going to be misunderstood. "No, it was nothing of the sort. I merely thought you might have made plans in town and it would be rude of me to expect you to change them."

Richard's eyebrows went up. "Thank you for the consideration to my feelings; even if it is unexpected."

Darcy jerked his head irritably. This might not be as easy as he'd thought.

But Elizabeth's steady gaze came into his mind, and he smiled slightly. The prize was worth any discomfort.

He slowly became aware of his cousin's amused gaze, and looked down at the glass in his hand.

"So why *do* you intend to stay in Kent?" Richard turned his gaze studiously out of the window.

"I — I have some unfinished business, Richard." Darcy had not fabricated a reply, and could think of nothing that might satisfy his cousin. He certainly could not say what his intention really was.

He slumped back in the chair, and lifted his glass. It was much too early in the day, but a sip or two wouldn't hurt and would occupy his hands.

How long before he saw Miss Elizabeth Bennet again?

Despite Richard's knowing smile, Darcy found himself walking out with him later that morning. It was the least difficult option, the only other being the ordeal of sitting in the dim and depressing drawing room with their aunt and her daughter.

He managed to steer their path close to Hunsford and shrugged as if disinterested when Richard gestured enquiringly at the parsonage.

But his heart was pounding as the housekeeper announced them, and he saw Miss Bennet rising to her feet beside Mrs. Collins and young Miss Lucas. He bowed as they curtsied.

"Thank you for calling on us." Mrs. Collins smiled politely. "Permit me to send for tea."

Darcy hesitated only a moment before crossing the room and taking a chair near Miss Bennet.

Fortune favours the brave. He hid a smile; he would not be accused of timidity, now he had decided to convince Miss Bennet that he was gentleman enough to win her approbation.

Her eyebrow rose a fraction, but she didn't smile, so he turned to the girl who sat beside her.

"I hope you're enjoying staying with your sister, Miss Lucas." He couldn't quite manage a smile, but hoped his expression was not too severe.

The girl blushed, and glanced at Miss Bennet for reassurance. "I am, sir. I was very glad to see my sister again."

He forced a polite smile. "I expect you missed her."

The girl nodded, suddenly dumb. Mrs. Collins joined the conversation.

"Yes, our other sisters are much younger than Maria, and our brothers are only interested in their own pursuits."

Darcy turned to her. "I understand, Mrs. Collins. If the age gap is large, especially when very young, friendships take on a different quality."

Richard was gaping at him, and Darcy frowned. Was it too much? Perhaps he was trying too hard. He waited for his cousin to take the next part of the conversation.

Miss Bennet was smiling cheerfully. "I was fortunate to be living close to Lucas Lodge when we grow up, so I was able to have the benefit of friendship with Charlotte as well as with my own sister."

Darcy smiled at the challenging light in her eyes. He took a careful breath.

"Close friendships are worth maintaining, whatever the cost." He wondered if the friendship between the ladies had fully survived Mrs. Collins' marriage and the need to maintain it by letter since then.

"They are, indeed!" Richard's entry into the conversation was welcome, and Darcy relaxed cautiously. He sipped at his tea and listened to the wide-ranging conversation.

His mind was on agreeable thoughts of Miss Bennet, when Richard's elbow dug him in the ribs. He started, and tried not to look guilty.

He raised an eyebrow enquiringly at his cousin. "I'm sorry, I was distracted."

"So I saw." Richard's look was far too knowing, and Darcy glanced away hurriedly.

Miss Bennet seemed to be finding it hard to control her mirth. "I only asked why you had decided to stay in Kent a little longer, Mr. Darcy. The colonel didn't appear to know."

Darcy tried not to scowl at his cousin. He was very glad he had thought of an excuse to stay. "There are one or two more of the Rosings ledgers I need to check, Miss Bennet. The steward is a good man, but my aunt likes me to check the books thoroughly when we stay here."

She nodded. "I understand." She would know there was another reason behind his being here, and he found he didn't mind that at all. But she was looking at her friend.

"Perhaps we ought to tell the gentlemen what Lady Catherine was saying about the estate before they arrived, Charlotte."

Mrs. Collins shook her head. "I expect she will have told her nephews,

Lizzy, if she wanted them to know.”

DARCY WALKED THOUGHTFULLY BACK to Rosings with Richard. “What do you think Miss Bennet was referring to when she mentioned Lady Catherine’s comment about the estate?”

Richard chuckled. “I thought you would try and distract me from the other reason you are staying here.” He elbowed Darcy painfully in the ribs. “And do not deny it!”

Darcy looked away. He was not about to discuss his real business here.

But Richard was not inclined to give up. He looked very serious. “For what it’s worth, she is an estimable young woman. But we must return to town. You cannot think of making her an offer!”

Darcy glanced at him. “I am not asking your opinion, Richard.”

“Maybe not, but I must protest, Cousin. Think how the family will respond to such news — they will make it very plain to her how much they disapprove.”

Darcy shrugged. “There will be an estrangement, then.”

He stopped when he became aware he’d left Richard behind. His cousin was standing in the path, staring at him.

“Good heavens, Darcy! You’re not thinking straight. Let us go back to town and you can reconsider. Think of it. If society disapproves of Miss Bennet, it will very materially disadvantage Georgiana.”

“Then society is an ass!” Darcy scowled and strode off. He could not allow the family to dictate his choice to him.

A moment later, his heart sank. He was not thinking of Miss Bennet in all of this. How would she feel if she had to live amongst the disapprobation of his family and wider society, and he had not considered it?

Without another thought, he turned on his heel. He would return to the parsonage. He must ask her what her thoughts were on the matter.

“Darcy!”

He ignored his cousin’s shout, and was relieved when he didn’t follow him.

The maid announced him and he noticed the surprise on all the ladies’

faces as he bowed.

“Would you care for more tea, Mr. Darcy?” Mrs. Collins rose to the occasion as Darcy suddenly realised he might embarrass Miss Bennet if he asked if she would speak to him.

“No. Thank you, Mrs. Collins.” He thought hastily, and turned to Miss Bennet.

She was regarding him thoughtfully, and he wondered if she knew what he was thinking. “I understand that Mrs. Collins said you ought not to break the confidences of my aunt, Miss Bennet, and I would not ask you to do so. But I wonder if I could speak to you for a moment? Perhaps we could take a turn about the garden.”

She looked down, a slight flush on her face. “Certainly, Mr. Darcy.” She turned to her friend.

“Perhaps Maria could take a seat outside, Charlotte. I’m sure it will not be more than a moment or two.”

Elizabeth hoped he was not being so thoughtless as to think he might renew his addresses to her in so public a manner.

She looked down as they strolled along the path, waiting for him to speak. But the silence stretched out, and eventually she glanced up.

“You wish to ask me about Lady Catherine’s concerns?”

The lines on his face deepened. “I do, although, as I said, I would not wish to embarrass you by having to dissemble in order not to break a confidence. But the most important part of the matter I discovered when my cousin spoke to me just now.” He rubbed his hand across his forehead and Elizabeth realised his thoughts must be in some disarray.

She waited quietly, wondering what this might mean. Despite her determination, a soft laugh escaped her. It was, after all, only last evening since they had exchanged stinging words of anger after his offer to her, and only that morning when he had given her the letter. She would not admit to anyone that she had made time to read it again — twice — in the privacy of her bedchamber.

But, if he thought to wear her down by continuing to pursue her despite her refusal, it would merely confirm her views of his disdain for the feelings of others.

He looked uncomfortable. “Miss Bennet, I am sorry if I have embarrassed you this day. I had no thought but to try to persuade you of my constancy and affections.” He stopped and turned to face her.

“But my cousin divined my feelings and, although he will never alter my hopes towards you, when he said that my family would disapprove, I realised I had not considered the effects such disapprobation might have upon you, were you to accept my suit.”

“Oh!” Her surprise could not be contained. “Did your cousin intimate that it would not be kind to me to expect such an attitude?”

“No.” Mr. Darcy sighed heavily. “He is only concerned with the effect on my sister.”

This was more what she thought would concern him; although it had been pleasant for a moment to think that his words stemmed from concern for her. She thought how best to speak.

“I suppose as he shares guardianship of Miss Darcy with you, she would be his first concern.”

“Perhaps.” His expression was brooding. “And I do have a duty towards her. But she has a good fortune, and will be able to make a good marriage, regardless.” His expression changed. “No. I am concerned if my family might be rude and ill-mannered towards you. I would not wish you to be caused any distress.”

She smiled. “And yet you seemed last night to be willing to ally yourself with the Bennet family, despite appearing to be distressed by their behaviour.” She let her eyebrow arch, before she turned and continued to stroll the path.

Mr. Darcy was beside her again. “On thinking of my words last night, I am dismayed by what I said. Your response was a profound lesson to me.”

“It was probably a painful one,” she kept her voice gentle. “I was also extremely impolite in the manner of my language. I am sorry.”

“I ought not to have expected anything else.” He shook his head. “Miss Bennet, if I can learn my lesson, and be able to behave — and think — in a more gentlemanlike manner, might I pray that you would permit me to continue to call on you, in the hope you might one day agree that I am worthy of your hand?”

She looked ahead, out towards the pastures and woods beyond the garden. She disliked him intensely, didn't she? She had told him so. She ought not to be flattered that she had such an effect on him that he was willing to abase himself in this manner.

But her heart was behaving most peculiarly, racing and fluttering in the manner her mother sometimes complained of. But the effect was quite pleasurable, and she had to make an effort that it not show on her countenance.

“How would you mitigate the effect upon your sister, Mr. Darcy?”

He shrugged slightly. “The best effect would be that, as her sister, you would be able to help her to gain confidence. She is very reticent. I think she would like to make your acquaintance.”

Elizabeth kept her gaze on the path. It was not quite what she had asked, and she must ask it again of him on another occasion. But she had more questions.

“Lady Catherine is quite disdainful enough for me to understand that the rest of your family might make things very difficult. How would you propose to protect me from them?” She glanced at him, and then away again, rather dismayed by the dawning hope in his eyes, given that she had not yet answered his main question.

“If they will not accept and welcome you to the family, then I will be estranged from them. If I were to have the honour to gain your hand, then your happiness and security would be the focus of my attention.” He smiled slightly. “I do not believe it would be necessary for the whole family, although I expect Lady Catherine would not stay silent in her disapproval.”

Elizabeth laughed. “I’m sure you’re right.”

“But my cousin will remain on cordial terms with us, I know, once he is assured of my determination. As for his parents; Lady Matlock is a kind and gracious lady, and her elder son and daughter-in-law are also amiable and friendly. So are her daughters.”

“You did not speak of your uncle.”

“He can appear quite fearsome on the outside, Miss Bennet. But I am convinced that once Lady Matlock knows and approves of you, there will be no difficulty in gaining his usual, if rather gruff, approval.” His hand brushed hers, a featherlight touch, and was gone before she was certain she had felt it. A wave of weakness spread through her legs, and she wondered quite when he had begun to have this effect on her.

He had not finished. “Society will give you no trouble if you become Mrs. Darcy, and, if before that, there are some raised eyebrows, I am certain that the redoubtable Miss Elizabeth Bennet would have no difficulty in holding her own with any of them.” The amusement in his eyes mingled with warmth and passion, and the weakness in Elizabeth’s legs intensified.

His voice was deeper, more passionate. “Miss Bennet, might it be possible for you to forgive my unpardonable behaviour last night, and permit me to prove to you that I am worthy of consideration?”

Darcy didn't know what he would do if she rejected even the possibility he might win her hand in the future, and he waited, barely breathing, for her answer.

"Darcy!" Richard's voice startled them both, and the moment was lost.

He turned and glared at him. If he was determined to separate him from Miss Bennet, then Richard would know the depth of his disapproval.

But his cousin was striding toward them both. He bowed at Miss Bennet. "I'm sorry to interrupt your stroll, madam, but I had no choice." He turned to Darcy.

"My parents have arrived at Rosings! You must return with me at once. Father seems fearfully angry."

"Why have they come?" Darcy was puzzled. "Is Georgiana with them? They ought not to have left her in London."

"No." Richard shook his head. "I suppose they have left her with Susannah. It is best, I think. If Father is angry, then Georgiana ought not to be here."

Darcy nodded shortly. "Very well." He took a deep breath and turned to Miss Bennet. If he kept his voice very low, perhaps Richard might understand and move away.

"My deepest apologies. Perhaps I need to go and find out what is amiss, although my instinct is to make them wait until ..."

She was smiling mischievously, and her murmur was just for him. "Perhaps it is an opportunity to practise your gentlemanlike behaviour. And you said your aunt was kind and gracious."

He bowed, trying to stop his lips twitching. "Indeed. I would hope you might meet them, although, as I said, I would not wish to impose my relations upon you, especially if you do not agree to my earlier

request.” A wild hope in his heart; perhaps she would signal her acceptance.

But it was not to be. “It would not be an imposition, Mr. Darcy. Perhaps it might assist me to discover the temper and level of the opposition.” Her eyes flashed, and he had to be satisfied. At least she had not turned him away. He bowed.

“I thank you for permitting my enquiry, madam.” He dragged his gaze unwillingly from her features, and looked for Richard, who had indeed moved tactfully away.

Gentlemanly. He must prove he could be gentlemanly.

“SO, ARE YOU COMMITTED?” Richard’s voice was low as they strode back to Rosings. “You do not look as if I should wish you joy.”

Darcy jerked to a halt. “Do not say anything that might prove you to have misread the situation, Richard. If you must know — the answer is no. I doubt Miss Bennet wishes anything to do with my family — or yours. I have a mountain to climb, and your father appearing here is just another obstacle!”

He turned away from his cousin, and resumed the march towards his angry uncle. He heard Richard’s step beside him. “But she would not refuse *you*.”

Darcy flickered a glance at him. “What makes you think that?”

“Well,” Richard gaped at him. “Pemberley. And you are one of the wealthiest men in all England!”

“Thank you for that expression of confidence,” Darcy said gloomily. If even his cousin couldn’t say he was amiable enough to win the heart of a lady, then he must be lost indeed.

“What do you think your father is angry about?” It was not possible he’d heard anything about Darcy’s current wishes. “Has he come to add his voice to Lady Catherine’s about it being time to unite Rosings with Pemberley?”

Richard chuckled. “Perhaps. I don’t know.”

Darcy cast him a glance. “It would be better to unite it with Matlock. Rosings has wealth enough to assist Matlock with the heavy expense of maintaining the estate of a peer. Or it could have, if it were better

managed.”

“I don’t want Lady Catherine as a mother-in-law as well as an aunt, thank you!” Richard said promptly.

Darcy shrugged. “You wouldn’t have to live here many weeks of the year — although I concede she might not move to the dower house as she ought.”

“But you told me the ledgers here paint a worrying picture of the state of Rosings,” Richard mused. “It would be Pemberley’s wealth she wants, not Matlock, which has little left to spare.”

“True.” Darcy saw they were only a few moments from the house. “And yet, as I said, it could do well with the right management. Are you sure you don’t want it? If you do not tell me now, I will be pushing your younger brothers at it. Either of them could work this place better than Lady Catherine, although you would be better still.”

Richard shuddered. “I beg you do not put my name forward, Darcy. One other obstacle would be sitting in that pew each week and listening to Collins for the rest of my life!”

Darcy laughed. “Very well. The decision is made.” He lengthened his stride. It was time.

“THERE YOU ARE, DARCY!” Lady Catherine seemed more than usually irate. “Come in and sit down. You ought to have been here this morning.”

Gentlemanlike behaviour. The whisper seemed to come from Miss Bennet herself, and Darcy could not prevent a smile, almost sensing her presence beside him.

“You are correct, Lady Catherine. If I had known of the intention of our relations to call, I would have remained here. As it is, I apologise.” He kept his voice mild, and bowed politely, before turning to his uncle and other aunt and bowing to them.

“Uncle Henry; Aunt Alice. I’m pleased to see you.”

Their astonished expressions matched that of Lady Catherine, and he could almost sense the amusement of Miss Bennet, were she here. He repressed his thoughts. He must concentrate on the situation at hand.

He took a seat beside Lady Matlock, and she reached forward to pour

him a cup of tea. He nodded at her.

“Thank you, Aunt. I hope Georgiana is well?”

She smiled warmly back at him. “Of course. Susannah is with her and will stay until we return home tomorrow.”

Darcy nodded and glanced at the window. It would be too dark to reach London again tonight unless they began the journey very soon. “I wonder at the urgency of coming today, as it is so late.”

She rolled her eyes slightly. “Your uncle insisted on leaving as soon as he received the letter.”

“The letter?” Darcy raised an eyebrow.

“Yes, my letter!” Lady Catherine cut across the conversation. “I had to tell my brother of the most incautious way you have been behaving, Darcy. This cannot be, and I need him to assist me in making sure you are not tied by such unseemly expectations! We must confirm your engagement to Anne, before anything can go wrong.”

Gentlemanlike. I must be gentlemanlike. Darcy took a moment to push the words and the warning to the front of his mind. This would be exceptionally difficult, and if he kept his tone mild, Lady Catherine might never believe him.

“I think you have no need to worry about your misapprehensions, Lady Catherine. But you know I will never marry Cousin Anne. I tell you that each time I visit. You must believe me.” He was very glad his frail cousin was resting upstairs. This must be as unpleasant for her as it was for him.

An unfamiliar warmth curled around his heart. Perhaps Miss Bennet would be able to help him befriend Anne and find out how he could help her without raising any expectations.

The whole party was gazing at him with astonishment — he could only imagine it was because of his pleasant tones and that he had not yet lost his temper.

He smiled easily, and turned his attention back to his hostess. “I have been thinking. If Anne would like your assistance to marry, perhaps we could consider one of my young cousins — Nicholas, or Jonathan? They are kind and gentle young men, who would be very good to Anne. And they are, of course, sons of an earl, more appropriate than a commoner.”

He pushed down his hope that she might be turned from her course so

easily and kept his gaze on her, pretending not to have heard the sharply indrawn breath of Aunt Alice beside him. Of course, she would wish to save yet another son from the risks of war that Richard took.

She rose to her feet. "Interesting as this conversation is, I must ask you to excuse me after the rigours of the journey, and permit me to retire." She looked at her son. "Richard, you will assist me."

Darcy watched them leave the room, trying not to allow his furrowed brow.

"Darcy!" His uncle drew his attention back. "You might allow your aunt to think one of my sons might make a good master of this estate, but not me! This idea of yours will not help prevent you being importuned and giving false expectations to this, most unsuitable young lady."

Darcy fixed his mind on those in the room. He must not allow his attention to wander. He must be explicit.

Elizabeth looked up in surprise from her needlework as she heard voices in the hall. Charlotte laid down her darning, looking calm.

“I expect it is someone from the parish, asking for assistance.” She rose to her feet. “Don’t worry, Lizzy, I will go and see what is amiss.”

But before she could take a step, the door opened and an overawed maid announced the arrival of the Countess of Matlock and Colonel Fitzwilliam.

He gave an embarrassed glance at Elizabeth before looking down, while Lady Matlock graciously accepted Charlotte’s greetings, and offer of tea.

After a very short time, though, that august personage put down her cup. “I apologise for seeming impolite, Mrs. Collins, but I would like the opportunity of speaking to Miss Bennet alone.” She turned to Elizabeth.

“Perhaps we could sit in the gardens for a few minutes?”

Elizabeth nodded. “Will you be warm enough, my lady? Should I fetch a blanket?”

The lady’s eyebrow rose in a manner that reminded her irresistibly of Mr. Darcy, and Elizabeth had to fight to keep her expression unmoved.

“Thank you for your concern, but the evening is warm,” the lady remarked, and Elizabeth was left to follow in her wake as she made her stately way into the garden.

Soon they were ensconced on the bench beneath the quince tree, which necessitated they were rather too close to each other for Elizabeth’s comfort. But she endeavoured to keep a serene expression on her face while she waited to discover what this was all about.

Lady Matlock was regarding her quizzically, but Elizabeth was

determined to appear unmoved.

Finally, the woman smiled, her mischievous expression startling in such an obviously well-born person. "I think I have my answer already, Miss Bennet."

Elizabeth smiled calmly, her heart racing. What had the lady heard?

"I cannot even imagine the question, my lady."

"My husband and I travelled from town this morning. He had received a letter from his sister." The lady's gaze was astute. "What do you think she was concerned about?"

Elizabeth looked down. "I have heard she wishes to hasten the marriage of her daughter to Mr. Darcy."

"And what do you feel about it?" The question seemed far too knowing.

Elizabeth allowed herself to smile. "I have heard both in Hertfordshire and here that it is a settled thing. I believe only the will of each principal needs to be discovered."

"Each principal!" Lady Matlock seemed startled. "What do you know of Anne's wishes?"

Elizabeth was surprised at her reaction. "I am not privy to them, my lady. Has she not made them known to you?"

There was a short silence before that lady drew her mind back to the present. "I must also ask you a difficult question, my dear. I do not do so to embarrass you, but Darcy is reticent with his words, as you must know. Are you engaged?"

"I am not." Elizabeth wasn't inclined to elucidate. "But I must protest. You ought to be asking your nephew about these matters, not someone so wholly unknown to you." Her suspicion sharpened. "Does he know you are here?"

"No," Lady Matlock met her eyes. "He believes I am resting after the journey."

A movement by the house caught Elizabeth's attention, and she smiled slightly. "I believe he is not deceived, madam."

She rose to her feet as Mr. Darcy strode across the lawn. He bowed briefly to his aunt, who inclined her head, not looking at all abashed. Then he turned to Elizabeth and bowed.

"I am deeply sorry, Miss Bennet, that I was unable to protect you from my relations." There was the slightest hesitation before he used her name and Elizabeth wondered, for a heart-stopping moment, if he would use her given name.

Her hesitation, while she regained her equilibrium, was all the opportunity his aunt required.

"Calm yourself, Darcy. I hope I am not so fearsome as all that. And Miss Bennet has been completely uninformative, referring me back to you."

Elizabeth saw a smile lighten his features, and he turned to her with warm regard.

"Thank you, Miss Bennet."

He turned back to Lady Matlock. "I see you are determined to discover what the situation is, although if you wish to side with Lady Catherine, I fear you may be disappointed."

He gave Elizabeth a sidelong glance before looking at his aunt. "I am almost sorry you have become acquainted. I would have been honoured to introduce to you a person who is possibly the only young lady in all of England who would refuse an offer of marriage from me."

Lady Matlock gaped at him, and Elizabeth felt that she was doing the same, although she was convinced she was hiding the fact better.

"She's refused you?"

And I am surprised you are not hiding the fact, Elizabeth spoke to him silently.

"Indeed. Miss Bennet is the lady I wish to share my life with, Aunt Alice. But I have a mountain to climb to gain her acceptance." He sighed.

"I would hope you would permit Richard to escort you back to Rosings, and convince Lady Catherine to consider Nicholas or Jonathan for Anne. Perhaps you can also ensure Miss Bennet is given the freedom to decide for herself what she wishes."

A smile tugged at the corner of Lady Matlock's lips, but she didn't move. "I will do as you wish in a moment, Darcy. But let me speak a little to Miss Bennet." She turned to face Elizabeth.

"I am sure you are imagining that I would disapprove and wish to speak firmly to you. But that could not be further from the truth." She

reached out and grasped Elizabeth's hand. "I have been worried about him, and while I would not wish to say this in front of him, I know he will not leave us alone, so he must listen. He is the kindest of men, even if that kindness is hidden behind a hard, uncompromising exterior. He needs someone who will pierce the armour he has built around himself, and make him laugh at things he could not before."

She smile reminiscently. "I can see he is already changed utterly, and though we have only just met, I am convinced that you are the one lady who can do that for him." She frowned slightly. "I do not know the reason you refused him, but I beg you to reconsider. Darcy deserves to be happy, and I am sure he can and will ensure your happiness, too."

"Thank you," Elizabeth murmured. "But the fault is not only with me. If your husband has investigated my family, he will think them unsuitable."

"It is you I wish to marry, Miss Bennet," Mr. Darcy broke in. "Then they will be my family." His lips twitched. "I have one or two embarrassing family members already."

Elizabeth looked down, smiling to herself at such a change having been wrought in him from his words only the previous evening.

Could he really change so quickly? She must not allow her heart to be touched too soon. Mr. Darcy must work for her approbation, however much he made her heart race when that warm regard wrapped itself comfortingly around her.

"Elizabeth. May I call you Elizabeth?" Lady Matlock sounded anxious, and her hand tightened round hers. "You must take the time you need, but I will welcome you to the family when the time comes." She hesitated. "It is likely Lady Catherine will discover what has transpired today. I hope you will not be too discomposed by her reaction."

Elizabeth nodded dispiritedly. "I would have hoped that the situation was not so widely known, my lady. But I suppose it cannot be hidden now."

The lady was regarding her thoughtfully. "I can, perhaps, conceal it if you wish."

Elizabeth looked down at her hand, still enclosed in that of Lady Matlock. "I hope that not too many people are aware of our disagreement last night."

The lady frowned. "You mean your refusal of Darcy's offer?"

"And the fact of it," Elizabeth said quietly. "I cannot think he would choose to have it broadcast."

Lady Matlock looked up at him. "And yet you vouchsafed the fact to me, Darcy, without my asking."

He bowed his head. "I did. Perhaps I was not thinking enough of Miss Bennet's wishes of the matter." He looked at her.

"I am sorry. No one else knows of it, to my knowledge, and perhaps we can keep it from going further."

Elizabeth rose to her feet. She'd had enough of the conversation now. "Perhaps. I hope so." She curtsied politely at the countess. "I would value time to consider what has happened."

"Of course," Lady Matlock said briskly, and rose to her feet. "Darcy, you can come with me and we can concoct a tale in the carriage to keep Miss Bennet as free from gossip as possible."

"As you wish." His voice was flat and without emotion as he answered his aunt, but his searing gaze when he looked at Elizabeth, took her breath away.

She waited where she was as they returned to the house, then sat back onto the bench, knowing with certainty that Charlotte, at least, would be hurrying out to her within minutes.

“**W**hat a delightful young lady.” Aunt Alice settled herself

onto the seat, and Richard stared at her in amazement.

Darcy smiled wryly. He would rather Richard didn’t hear the details of what his aunt would say, but doubted it could be managed.

“Aunt Alice, Richard does not know the facts of what was discussed ...”

“And I won’t be discussing any details now,” she interrupted him tartly. “Now, listen. We only have a few moments. I am going to tell Lady Catherine that I have spoken to Miss Bennet, that there is no engagement, and she is not the obstacle to your marriage to Anne. Then I propose the discussion stops there, and I turn the subject to the real obstacle, which is that neither you nor Anne wish to proceed with the marriage. Am I right?”

Darcy nodded, a little dazed. If accepted, Lady Catherine would have no reason to upbraid Miss Bennet, and he hoped it might mean she would be more amiably inclined to the family.

Richard’s elbow dug into his side again, and he scowled.

Richard guffawed. “That’s the old Darcy back!”

His aunt glared at her son. “Leave him be, Richard. Now, I want to ask you as you know Anne better than I do, will Nicholas or Jonathan be a better fit for her?”

“Jonathan.” Richard’s reply was instant. “He calls here more often than his brother, and is not so obsequious to Lady Catherine. He will be able to keep Anne safer, and she likes him.”

Darcy stared at Richard. “Why did you never say?”

His cousin shrugged. “No one ever asked.”

Aunt Alice snorted. “You could have saved us a great deal of trouble,”

she remonstrated, and Richard finally looked abashed.

But Darcy had stopped listening. How soon dare he go back and find out how Miss Bennet fared? *Elizabeth*. He would think of her thus in his mind, and weakness stole through him. She had seemed a little discomposed, but not angry with him, and his hopes lifted.

But he probably should not call again today — it would be the fourth time — and his heart sank again. He would walk out in the morning and perhaps he would discover her there. If he filled his time here, it would seem to come sooner. He followed his relations into the drawing room, his mind far away. But he would have to be cognisant of what was going on.

He drew his attention to the room and leaned forward. After a few moments, he saw his opportunity.

“Perhaps I might be of assistance, Lady Catherine. I understood from the steward’s ledger the need for new fencing, and the removal of fencing from the common land. I am sure that will make a difference so Jonathan can begin to assist you with the estate management on the right foot with your steward.”

Lady Catherine’s face was filled with burning resentment, but Aunt Alice smiled and nudged her husband. Uncle Henry glanced sideways, then nodded. “It is a good idea, Catherine. Darcy has always been able to see the best way around difficulties. In fact, I am indebted to him for assisting me in a similar manner at Hayden Hall last summer. I told you about it then, I recall.”

Lady Catherine nodded reluctantly. “Darcy would be better able to make the estate valuable for Anne.”

“He will be assisting Jonathan, so there will be two gentlemen helping her.” There was a slight edge to Uncle Henry’s voice, and Lady Catherine glanced at his face before subsiding.

IT WAS NOT LONG after dawn when Darcy drew on his boots and shrugged his topcoat on. He wasn’t sure how early Miss Bennet walked out each day, but he was determined not to waste a moment.

He strode up and down the grove, waiting. He could hardly believe how much things had changed in just a day. Yesterday he’d stood here, letter in hand, waiting for her, his heart despairing, thinking he’d lost her for ever.

Now he knew he must take the time to convince her that he could change — not just for a short time — but for good; that he could be a man she would agree to marry. And there was hope in his heart.

Nothing else would do. He would be whatever she wanted, his love demanded no less.

He remembered Aunt Alice tucking her hand into his arm last night for him to lead her into dinner, and whispering that her opinion was that Miss Bennet may already be inclined to change her opinion. His heart was uplifted, and he had even been able to bear the evening with good humour.

The sight of Mr. Darcy standing in the grove waiting for her, raised Elizabeth's spirits. The fine spring morning had already revived her enjoyment of this countryside, and the memory of the kindness of the countess had given her cause to reflect during the night.

It seemed the countess would give her blessing if Elizabeth married Mr. Darcy, so the certainty of his family's disapproval, as he detailed when he made his offer, was no longer a particular concern. And she seemed a very pleasant lady, despite her title.

And here was Mr. Darcy, back again for more. She smiled slightly, although when her opinion of him had begun to change, she hardly knew.

He strode towards her, his expression guarded, and bowed. "Good morning, Miss Bennet. I hope you were not too discomposed by the events of yesterday to have a disturbed night."

She smiled slightly. "No more than you, sir."

His eyebrows rose. "That bad, hmm?"

His amusement joined hers, and, as they sobered, the passion in his eyes took her breath away, and she tore her gaze from him, turned and began her stroll.

He was at her side. "May I join you this morning?"

Elizabeth allowed her lips to curve. "I believe you already have, Mr. Darcy."

He huffed a quiet laugh, and they strolled in silence for some minutes, before he spoke.

"I would not wish you to be discomposed with what I want to say, and the level of my emotion, Miss Bennet, although I might ask you to be explicit if you feel there is anything you need me to understand."

He ran his hand through his hair, seeming to be uncertain what he wished to say. "I wanted to say again how sorry I am that you were disturbed by my relations yesterday, although I hope it might have been helpful to you."

Elizabeth smiled. "I was pleased to meet her ladyship, although I suppose you ought to return to Rosings while they are still there."

He nodded reluctantly. "May I call upon you later?"

She turned to him. "I think you would be far better to return to town with your cousin. It will make life here easier, as Lady Catherine will be calmer in her mind about me." She shook her head when he seemed about to object.

"Take time to think, Mr. Darcy. It has only been a day. If — if you still feel the same when I return to London on Saturday next, you may call on me as I will be staying in town for several days."

He had been looking almost distraught at the beginning of her little speech, but by the end, he looked more hopeful.

"If you give me the direction, Miss Bennet, I will certainly call. I pray that you will receive me." His searing gaze sent a wash of warmth through her, and she knew she must escape before he divined her feelings.

She curtsied. "I will complete my walk. Until next week, Mr. Darcy — if you still wish to call."

She hoped he wouldn't follow her, and began to walk with some energy towards the denser woodland.

Should he call on her at Cheapside, she could be more certain of his attempts to be more gentlemanly. Her lips twitched; she would watch how he behaved towards her aunt and uncle.

But perhaps he wouldn't call. Once he was away from here, he might think he had escaped from some moment of madness, and believe he had escaped a most imprudent marriage.

Her spirits fell. What was she thinking of, considering this man? He was the man who had torn Bingley from her sister.

No, she ought not to believe any change in his behaviour. His actions in the past spoke more of the real man.

HER LOW SPIRITS persisted throughout the next week and she had to work hard not to seem discomposed at the loss of the company of the two gentlemen. She would not have any of her acquaintances in Kent thinking something significant had passed between them.

Elizabeth was very glad to say her farewells and climb onto the coach at last.

She leaned back against the seat and closed her eyes, thinking that Maria's prattle was hardly to be borne over the next hours.

The journey was not a comfortable one. Mr. Collins' driver helped to ensure their trunks were placed on the post coach, and Elizabeth was very happy her uncle's manservant was there to meet them at the post stop. She was able to relax about their baggage, although stopping at Bromley to change the horses, and a lack of other opportunity to move in the crowded coach, meant she was very glad to arrive at the post stop by Leadenhall Market.

A cart had been sent to take their luggage and a maid was waiting to accompany Elizabeth and Maria to her aunt's house those few yards further.

"I hope there's nothing wrong at the house," Elizabeth murmured to Maria, puzzled over the fact that neither her aunt nor Jane was there to meet them. She stood straighter. "Let's hurry."

She couldn't walk too fast, she knew. Her aunt would not consider it ladylike, but it was only a few minutes, and then she would know if there was anything amiss.

Maria gasped, and Elizabeth slowed a fraction, looking round. "What is it?"

"Mr. Darcy!" Maria blushed a deep crimson, and Elizabeth turned to see him striding towards them.

She raised her head before dipping in a curtsy, trying not to smile.

"I was not expecting to see you here, Mr. Darcy."

He smiled wryly. "If I had any notion you would be taking the post, Miss Bennet, I would have sent my coach to Kent." He bowed. "But your aunt permitted me to walk here to accompany you when I realised you were alone."

She raised her eyebrows. "I thank you for the civility, sir. But I am not alone. Maria, the maid, and a manservant are following, so you see, I am quite safe." She relaxed a little. "But you may walk with us, if you

wish.”

He dipped his head slightly. “I thank you for the honour, madam.” He turned and strolled along beside them, though he didn’t walk too close, to her relief.

“Is all well at the house?” Elizabeth couldn’t wait to find out what might be wrong.

He nodded. “I believe so. I am sorry we called at what was obviously the wrong moment. I had made the incorrect assumption that you would already have arrived.”

Warmth spread through her. It seemed he had called upon her as early as he could. But she needed to see Jane, to see if she was more content with her situation.

Darcy stood back for the ladies to enter the house first. But he wanted to see Miss Bennet's expression when she saw her elder sister — and Bingley.

His heart constricted as he saw her face, alive with anticipation, as she pulled on the ribbons of her hat, all her attention in the next room.

Would his action help her understand his determination to be the sort of man she could consider? He took a few steps forward, wishing to see the reunion.

"Jane!" She rushed forward to embrace her sister, then stopped suddenly as she saw Bingley standing beside her. Darcy watched as she hesitated briefly before she curtsied politely.

"It is a pleasant surprise to see you, Mr. Bingley." She glanced at her sister. "Jane didn't tell me you had discovered her in London."

Bingley laughed. "Indeed. I only discovered her this last week, and have been honoured that your aunt and sister have welcomed my calls."

Miss Bennet — no, Miss Elizabeth Bennet — leaned forward to kiss her sister. "I'm happy to see you, Jane. We have a lot to talk about."

Then she stepped back and turned to give Darcy a challenging look.

He attempted to maintain his impassive expression, and her eyes danced with glee, before she turned to greet her aunt.

Soon she was beside him. "I suppose you to have had something to do with Mr. Bingley being here, Mr. Darcy?"

He shifted uncomfortably. "I confess I wrote to him after our conversation, Miss Be—, I mean, Miss Elizabeth. But I did not then have the direction to give him, he discovered that for himself."

She looked down. "I suppose he demanded it from his sister." Her

murmur was very quiet. "But it is — *gentlemanlike* — of you to ascribe some of the effort to him. I thank you."

The lump in his throat was painful to swallow. Was there a promise in her words?

He could not speak as he wished to, the formality as they sat over tea was torture. But at least he could watch her.

Miss Elizabeth. The thought of her given name rolled round in his mind, and he had to force his attention back to the room.

"I'm sorry, Aunt Gardiner." Elizabeth put down her cup. "It was such a long journey, and the coach was crowded. I think I'd like to take a turn in the garden, if anyone would care to join me."

Her attention to him was almost unnoticeable, but Darcy was convinced her words were aimed at him.

"Perhaps I may escort you, Miss Elizabeth?" He rose to his feet. He would permit nobody to deprive him of the opportunity of strolling beside her. The previous week, while she had remained in Kent, had been difficult. He'd missed her acutely, and had great difficulty in keeping his discomposure from Georgiana.

SHE SEEMED thoughtful as she strolled beside him, and the other members of the party drifted away down other paths. There was so much he wished to say, but he would not interrupt her thoughts. She must be weary from the journey, and his heart twisted. How could he have failed to send his coach for them, leaving them to the rigours of the post?

"Well, Mr. Darcy," her voice intruded on his own thoughts. "You seem to be making very good progress in your attempts to behave in a more gentlemanlike manner." Her smile lit up her expression, and his spirits lifted.

"And yet, I have failed again this morning, Miss Elizabeth." He sighed. "I ought to have considered that you had no conveyance and sent my coach. I cannot abide the thought of you having taken the post."

"No, Mr. Darcy, it would have been wrong of you to send your coach when Lady Catherine has been finally convinced there is nothing between us." Her soft voice curled round his heart and twined itself into his very being.

A slight frown appeared between her brows. "Is something amiss, Mr. Darcy?"

He forced a smile. "Not at all. I am relieved the last week is over and you have allowed me to call upon you." When might he be confident of repeating his offer? How much longer could he live without her?

She was walking on. "I must apologise, having now seen how difficult you find being in company. I ought not to have forced your attempt to be more sociable."

The scent of lavender swirled around him. Her proximity was both a delight and a torture. "Not at all. I confess my behaviour and my words were abominable. It has been a salutary lesson, but one I am determined to master."

To his utter consternation, she moved slightly closer to him, and tucked her hand into his arm. Every coherent thought fled his mind.

"I think there is nothing you cannot master." Her whisper threaded through what remained of his senses and he stopped and looked down at her.

"I — might you do me the honour of informing me, Miss Elizabeth — am I on the right path to satisfying you of my intentions, my hopes of pleasing you?"

Her gaze was luminous and she met his eyes fearlessly. "Yes, Mr. Darcy. In fact, I may inform you, with perfect confidence, that you might well have reached the end of the path." Her slight smile gave him confidence, even as she began to stroll on, and he matched her pace, wanting nothing more than the curve of the path to hide them behind some reasonable size shrubbery.

It was not much, but he found he cared nothing for being observed.

"Miss Elizabeth, I hope I have read your words aright. Might I hope that my wishes accord with yours, that you might do me the very great honour of receiving my addresses with pleasure?" It was hard to breathe, difficult to await her response, impossible to fight down his fear of losing her forever.

She placed her hand on his, and her smile held the promise of his wishes as he lifted her hand to his lips, which pulsed with the touch of her skin.

He knew his voice was hoarse as he reluctantly released her hand. "Pray be explicit, Miss Elizabeth. I am honoured at any consent you give me to be beside you, but — might I humbly hope you would do

me the very great honour of accepting my hand in marriage?"

"I will, Mr. Darcy." Her eyes met his, warm and loving. "You have taken my unkind words to heart and sought to change, to make yourself a better man." She lowered her eyes. "I am ashamed I believed ill of you before, and utterly grateful you stayed to convince me of your goodness. I am fortunate beyond measure."

"It is I who am blessed." Darcy took her hand again. "How soon, Elizabeth? How soon will you make me the happiest of men, and stand beside me at the altar?"

Elizabeth watched as the clergyman wrapped his stole in a symbolic knot over their joined hands.

“Those whom God hath joined together let no man put asunder.”

She lifted her gaze to her husband’s face. His eyes were dark with love and passion.

“Thank you for granting me the honour of agreeing to become Mrs. Darcy.” His murmur was just for her, and her heart jumped, as it often had when he was near during these last few weeks before their marriage.

She must concentrate on these last hours; give her time to Jane and her new husband as they walked before them down the aisle, and then find some way of protecting her own new husband from the worst excesses of her mother and younger sisters.

His arm tightened on her hand and he bent his head close to hers. “Don’t be anxious, Elizabeth. There is nothing I cannot do with you beside me.” There was a hint of laughter in his voice. “And soon we will be at Darcy House for the first night of our married life.”

Her legs went weak beneath her at the thought, and she had to give all her attention to appearing calm and serene.

THE FLICKERING CANDLELIGHT gleamed on the silverware and sparkled from the cut glass goblets as she sat beside him at dinner.

The close lighting hid the rest of the vast room from her sight, making their place seem small and intimate, and his attention made her feel cherished and loved.

She raised her hand as the footman offered her the salver. “Thank you, I have had sufficient.”

William's quiet chuckle drew her attention. "Might you be agreeable if we take our coffee in our apartments, Elizabeth?"

She lifted her eyes to his. "Of course." It would be better than the formality of sitting in the great drawing room, with servants all around.

Finally, they were alone together, and he drew her into his arms, his eyes deep pools of passion and desire as he gazed at her.

"My beloved Elizabeth!"

His arms tightened around her and she lifted her face to his as his lips touched hers. The heat of his passion lifted her own. The strength of his lean body as he held her in his embrace, and the scent of sage, old leather, and the wild peaks of the north, together bound her closer to him and the power in her legs seemed to dissolve.

"William," she murmured, just a breath of sound against his mouth, and he lifted his head reluctantly.

"You're right, I ought to allow us to take our coffee while it is hot."

"That's not what I meant," Elizabeth pressed her body closer. "I'm going to have to learn ..."

"No. We'll both learn. Together." He turned and led her to the sofa, drawing her to sit close beside him.

She leaned against him in quiet contentment. "May I say one thing?"

He huffed a laugh. "Only one?" and she smiled ruefully.

"You have impressed upon me most convincingly of your gentlemanlike manners, but I have a confession to make." She looked up at him teasingly.

William's arm tightened around her. "I am happy you have been convinced of it. And what is this confession, which I hope, looking at your smile, is not so very terrible?"

She snuggled in close to him, delighting that she now had the right to be close to him. "Why, only that all the talk I have heard of the relationship within marriage, makes me wonder if I can be ladylike in the way that seems to be expected of us."

He failed to fully muffle his snort of laughter. "I cannot imagine what you mean, Elizabeth. I think I might embarrass you if I ask you to be explicit, so we will have to content ourselves with finishing our coffee."

Soon enough, she was in her chamber, watching him stride through the connecting door towards her. He placed a finger under her chin and tipped her face up to his. Then his mouth was on hers, deepening their kiss and his arm went round her, holding her close.

A moment later, and he lifted her to the bed. "Let me show you how ardently I admire and love you, Mrs. Darcy." His chuckle was warm and wrapped her around with love.

The dawn light slowly lightened the room through the gap in the curtains. Darcy watched his wife sleeping in his embrace. A deep, abiding contentment filled him; he was utterly content — and very glad he'd refused to allow himself to escape the source of his humiliation at the parsonage that terrible evening. It had been mortifying to stay and recall the bitter words she'd flung at him. More mortifying still, to acknowledge the truth of her words, and how dreadful his behaviour.

He'd had no choice; he knew he must change, be more of a gentleman — a man who could win the heart of Elizabeth. And he had succeeded. She lay in his arms, dark lashes lying on soft cheeks, a warm comfort to him, even in sleep.

Darcy could relax. She was here. He loved her, and she'd consented to marry him. Now he had won the right to have her beside him forever. He could sleep again, knowing she was safe.

A moment later, he felt the palm of her hand sliding against his chest to press against his heart. He smiled. "You were asleep a moment ago."

"That was a moment ago." Elizabeth's eyes danced. "But now we have time together without risk of interruption, don't we?" She pressed herself closer to him. "And, as I said, being ladylike is perhaps not what I can be all the time. So, I am asking you ...?" Her eyebrow lifted in teasing anticipation.

"How can I ever refuse you?" Darcy drew her closer still. "Dearest Elizabeth."

Harriet Knowles

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